



From Raw to Fired

Alexandra Engelfriet moves from performative clay to wood-fired objects. Nesrin During reports.

A true mud person, Alexandra Engelfriet makes raw clay work and ceramic sculpture. Physical interaction with clay is at the core of her work. Her body, feet, knees, hands, and elbows are the only tools she applies to clay. They dig, slash, hit, imprint. Clay, silt, sand, organic matter softened with water are heavy but generous materials that meet Alexandra, giving and receiving. The dialogue between Alexandra and clay is a process and an experience.

RAW CLAY PROJECTS Alexandra has been doing raw clay projects around the world for the past twenty years. Some of these have been filmed, such as *The Marl Hole* project in North Staffordshire in 2009, filmed by Johnny Magee in the biggest clay quarry of Europe, together with Torbjørn Kvasbø, Neil Brownsword, and Pekka Paikkari.

In 2011 she did a field project with university students in Hobart, Tasmania, which was also filmed as a documentary by Glen Dunn.



1 Alexandra Engelfriet at work (Photo: Johnny Magee) 2 *Dust to Dust*, a performance using eight tons of clay from the riverbeds of the Kleine Gelderse Waard, the Netherlands, filmed by Marlou van den Berge, 2011 (Photo: Bouwe Jan Swart)

This year she participated in another raw clay project in Norway, initiated by Torbjørn Kvasbø. She has also done an indoor raw clay project for the 12th *Parcours Céramiques Carougeois* in Switzerland.

The documentary film *Tracks in the Flats* by Carrie de Swaan (2003), shows Alexandra at work on the coast of the Waddenzee, the inner sea of Holland, where she patterns an enormous field of silt in the estuary worked by her body, which then disappears when the tide turns and her work is swallowed by the rising water. *Dust to Dust* is another documentary of a performance, filmed by Marlou van den Berge in 2011. This time indoors, working with seven tons of clay and thirty metres of textile, she projects her emotions and grief after the death of a much beloved friend, onto the clay.

THE MOVE TO SCULPTURE Alexandra started working with clay in 1990. She has worked through tons of clay, danced her dance,

leaving behind the films and photos that document her vanishing work, which crumbles and washes away. Her desire to give her work more lasting life and to make three-dimensional work on a smaller scale, are the reasons why Alexandra now chooses to make ceramic sculpture next to her raw clay work. Her idea of sculpture is non-traditional. The artists that inspired her in earlier years – like Richard Serra, Richard Long, Robert Smithson, and James Turrell – are artists who have broken away from traditional ways, liberating the artistic path to new approaches to sculpture. Once again Alexandra insists on using her body to shape her ceramic sculpture. Another requirement is that the properties of the raw clay remain visible. She works intuitively; she does not have a preconceived idea or plan, but relies on the process of making. She has an open approach to clay – she tries it, and what works she accepts, what doesn't is rejected. By her absolute involvement with

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3 Alexandra Engelfriet at work (Photo: Cheryl Smith) 4 Trench kiln, 2010, H100cm 5 Work in progress, clay on a bed of straw, 2011, H35cm (Photo: Stefan During) 6 Untitled, wood-fired stoneware, 2011, H26cm

Email alexandra.engelfriet@gmail.com Web www.alexandra-engelfriet.nl Films Clips from *Tracks in the Flats* (2002), *Marl Hole* (2009), *Dust to Dust* (2011), and *Reclaim* (2011) can be seen at www.alexandra-engelfriet.nl/film-ll.php

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covered with a thick layer of mud and sawdust. The floor of the kiln is brick. At the back of the trench is a chimney hole made of earthenware pipe, also at an inclination, that goes underground and emerges higher up to a small chimney made of bricks. After it has been filled, the top of the kiln is covered by soft bricks that are threaded with an iron rod (an idea learned from Owen Rye). This very simple kiln, fired with the help of friends, ramps to 1300°C in about fourteen hours. The works are heavily reduced. Nothing is glazed. Alexandra wood fires for the natural look this firing gives to her work. Because the pieces in the kiln are made of a mixture of several sorts of clay, with different melting temperatures, her work emerges looking like lava stones. She is content with their tactile surfaces. For her, the physical feat of wood firing is a process that completes the cycle.

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BACKGROUND Alexandra was born in Leiden, Holland, in 1959, to a Dutch father and an English mother. She started out studying history, but switched to fashion design in Amsterdam to find an outlet for her creativity. After this, she found that the world of glamour and money wasn't what she was after; she wanted to work with her hands. So she went to the Rietveld Art Academy in Amsterdam and chose an autonomous study programme that left her free to experiment with many materials.

At first her efforts to express herself had more to do with textiles, and then came plaster, and eventually earth. She tried to cover a vertical wall with black earth and came into contact with sliding mud that wouldn't stay put. She tried to shape it with her body and this was the beginning of her career as a body clay artist; she had found a material that responded to her, while retaining a will of its own. She didn't want to tame it, but to work with it. Without using any tools apart from her own body, she created imprints that were like ripples on water or sand. She could pass her emotions onto the clay with repetitive movements, and the clay and sand would let them sink in and absorb. It was perishable work, but worthwhile for Alexandra.

Alexandra lives part of the year in Burgundy, France, in an old farmhouse. Her studio is an old cowshed, not so recognisable as a clay studio. The floor of this huge space is covered with lumps of clay lying on haystacks. Outside, the trench kiln overlooks fabulous pasture landscapes.

For Alexandra, it all makes sense. She is not primarily concerned with the aesthetics of the sculptures. She works intuitively, not controlling the work but going along with it, 'surrendering', as she says, to the material and the experience. ■

the material, she comes to feel its essence, understanding it through and through.

Her first attempts at ceramic sculpture consisted of stacking clay layers in a rhythmic manner; she never designs or builds her work. Recently she has been forming clay humps on small haystacks. She moulds these random heaps of clay with her feet, treads them with her toes, shapes them with her elbows and fingers. The cracks and bursts are left as they happen. What emerges is as it should be. Nothing is smoothed out. The sculptural work is fired to make it last.

WOOD FIRING To keep the natural essence of her work, Alexandra fires her work in a wood kiln. To learn about wood-firing kilns and how to fire them, she obtained a grant as artist-in-residence for three months at Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center in Denmark in 2008. She also attended the *First European Woodfire Conference* in Germany in 2010. But meeting and talking to Torbjørn Kvasbø about wood firing during *The Marl Hole* project in Stoke-on-Trent was decisive for her approach to building her own kiln. She built herself a very simple trench wood kiln at her French farmhouse, in the natural inclination of the hillside. The walls are